

Six Year Olds Growing Up and Choosing Jewish Connection

What's Needed?

Models That Make a Difference

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Sara P., a 17 year old high school senior did a great job singing the national anthem at her school's soccer game. "But," says Sara, "they were pissed when I didn't stay for the game. I had to get back to synagogue to be a *madricha* (student assistant)."

What was the pull to the *shul*? What model of part-time Jewish education contributed to Sara thinking her role as a *madricha* was so important?

Beginning in first grade, she and her family participated in a Shabbat congregational model. The message to families at this Conservative Congregation with about 350 member units was "the whole family goes on the journey, where you end up is determined by the family, but **children do not do this alone.**" The community was given the message, families don't do this alone.

Sara, her parents, and siblings participated in part-time Jewish learning every Shabbat since she was in first grade. Her parents, both lawyers, continue Shabbat learning, schmoozing and praying. They didn't participate because they had too much free time. At first they signed up because they wanted their children to have a good experience. They stayed because the experience holds something important for them.

The family's learning experience was situated in the congregation's larger community Shabbat focus. Adult learning, praying and socializing were integrated with child-centered and family experience. The term Hebrew School was replaced with *Beit Midrash*/house of study. Often the whole community studies the same big ideas, shares prayer or meal time. The same melodies flow from early childhood through the teens to the seniors. "I loved my *madrach* (my teen assistant) when I was ten," says Sara whisking her blonde hair behind her ear, "I wanted to be with the little kids the way my *madrach* was with me."

Now Sara volunteers every Shabbat with 15 other young people in the Shabbat model of family and community connections. One hour of her 3.5 hour morning is spent exploring how Torah can inform her role as a *madricha*.

Two weeks ago, as a new driver, Sara had a car accident. "My car was totaled." The *madrachim* helped her bench *birkat hagomel* (recite the prayers said after escaping danger) and talk through the trauma of seeing her car cut in half. Outwardly, Sara just had bruises that would soon heal naturally. But inwardly, seeds of fear and anxiety were not so easy to see or to heal. She liked the Jewish custom of giving *tzedakah* after coming out of danger. Sara's teacher facebooked her the following week for a check in. Her teacher, who designs learning for the whole person (for the head-knowledge, the hand-action, the feet-a sense of belonging and the heart-values/beliefs), understood the importance and impact of Sara having the support of the community to which she belongs.



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Where will Sara be when she is 25 years old faced with making life choices, the big and the small ones? We don't know. She, like all young people, is on a journey trying to have a life of meaning and purpose. Young peoples' lives are flooded with possibilities. The work of congregational education is to be **full partners** with families and the community to help children be able to and want to be grounded in the riches of Judaism.

To accomplish this goal, leading educators alter the basic architecture of part time-congregational education. A classroom alone, no matter how engaging, is not enough.

A more expansive model is necessary. What will those models look like? Next decade designers can learn from early innovators. In the first decade of the 21st century, a coalition of congregations began altering the basic congregational school model. A review of 23 congregations in the New York area, known as the Coalition of Innovating Congregations, reveals **8 building blocks** which are used to take the first steps in creating a fundamentally new model of part-time Jewish education. If the drop off classroom activity model is not enough, then what model of part-time Jewish education will enable a six year old to grow up and make the kind of decisions that Sara is making?

Next decade designers will create more models that look less like the school

A new distinctive Jewish educational architecture will use unique combinations of the eight building blocks that have emerged from early experiments. Most certainly additional building blocks waiting to be imagined will be added. Emerging models include unique combinations of multiple building blocks.

Eight Building Blocks for New Distinctive Architecture

1. Regular engagement of parent/caregiver as well as the child

Parents and families are essential to a child's life journey according to designers who use this building block. Regular engagement (e.g weekly learning at synagogue, home or other settings, socializing, using daily life as a classroom) of families most often includes a combination of adult and family learning and Jewish living. Engagement includes time for praying, learning, socializing, and action. This building block contrasts with programs that offer additive family programming (e.g. parents attend programs a few times year). Family engagement becomes regularized. The whole family, not just the child is considered the focus of engagement.

2. Learning in real life settings

Emphasis is placed on the lived experience of Judaism. Focus is on doing and being Jewish instead of a classroom experience that teaches *about* being Jewish. Instead of preparation for a "someday" event, this building block emphasizes the lived experience of doing and being Jewish. Shabbat, holidays, home, and *tikkun olam* action are examples of the lived experience that becomes central with this building block. While the lived experience is essential in this model, most often it is book-ended with pre-learning that enables rich participation and post-learning that enables meaningful reflection.



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3. Integrating children's Jewish learning experience with the larger congregation's values and practices

Recognizing the influence of a “norming” community, this model situates a child's experience within the prime activities of the larger congregation. A “norming” community models “what is learned is lived.” It provides *a living context for content*. This contrasts to models where children's experience is physically separated from the central activity of the congregation (e.g. in the basement), separated in time (e.g. on times and days where the larger congregation does not gather) and or separated by core activities (e.g. children study content areas, while the larger congregation is deeply engaged in acts of *gemilut chasadim*).

4. Making connections with the larger community

This building block assumes the benefit of cluster experiences where a child has multiple Jewish experiences in multiple settings over the course of time. This building block recognizes that the congregation is not the only effective way to engage a Jewish child. When applied, child's regularized experience is connected in significant ways to resources in the community such as summer camp, museums, Israel, and youth organizations. One can imagine a model where learning during the year is linked to visits to Israel and/or camp. Next step models might include year long experiences that are more like being in Israel or camp than in a classroom setting.

5. New Teacher roles and expectations

Just as the traditional classroom model, even if it has engaging activities, will not reach the goals set by the congregations, neither will traditional teaching. Congregations build regular time (e.g. twice a month) for teachers to learn how to create powerful learning aligned to their learner outcomes (e.g. Learners will be on a journey of applying Torah to daily life). Hired staff, teens and adults in the community learn together, and review one another's practice within their own learning community. They learn from one another to shift teaching practice from a focus on covering material to creating learning that is a) life centered, b) relationship focused, c) makes rich content accessible and d) enables inquiry, reflection and meaning making. When this building block is established, congregations transform the traditional “teacher” role to facilitator, counselor and/or mentor.

6. Relationships among peers and across generations

Peer relationships, teen role models and intergenerational connections are viewed as essential to raising a child. Accordingly, this building block ensures that a child develops relationships with peers, teens, and adults in the larger community. An example is a model that has seniors and teens meeting weekly for Jewish learning and living with children and families. With this building block, children's experiences are situated in multi-aged *havurote* (learning partners/groups). Another adaptation of this building block is a model that prepares adults in the community to act as mentors for children and families.

7. Choices for the learner

According to this building block, one Jewish learning plan does not fit all.. The system of Jewish education that emerged in the US in the 1950's had each congregation offering one model of learning, x number of days and with specific subjects to teach. Now congregations are empowering learners with bolder choices. Families choose programs or learning plans. Or individual learners can shape or choose their method or area of learning. Choice for the learner also impacts the nature of learning where the learner drives inquiry and exploration.



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8. Other

Additional building blocks were noted in the first decade models created in NY that were used, but have not yet been widely implemented. An example of this is the use of technology. For example, congregations are recognizing that decoding skills, although important, can be achieved at will online or through Skype with a person.

Next decade designers will create models based on these eight building blocks and ones yet to be articulated. New models will engage young children in ways that they enable them to construct lives of meaning and purpose, because of the deep connections they have made with Judaism and the Jewish people.

Based on

Experimenting with the Architecture of Jewish Education: Building Blocks for Next Decade Models

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